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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CAIRO 005210

SIPDIS

NSC STAFF FOR POUNDS

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TAGS: [KISL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [EG](#)

SUBJECT: EGYPT'S MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD: INTERNAL COUP REPORTS,  
KEY LEADER DISCIPLINED, STRANGE ALLIANCE FORMED

REF: A. CAIRO 3941

[1](#)B. CAIRO 3755

Classified by ECPO Counselor John Desrocher for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

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Summary  
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[1](#)1. (C) There have been numerous reports in early July that Mahdy Akef, the Supreme Guide of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood (MB), has been sidelined by an internal coup. Akef, and his alleged successor, Deputy Supreme Guide Mohammed Habib, have denied the reports, but their denials have yet to douse the speculation. There has also been significant commentary on the reported demotion within the organization of Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, widely seen as the most pragmatic and "liberal" member of the group's leadership. Meanwhile, an MB attempt to form a broadly-based "National Coalition for Reform and Change" appears to have fallen well short of expectations, as most supposed coalition members have disavowed any involvement in the effort. The repudiation of most of the supposed coalition members was an embarrassing setback for the MB, leaving only the "Revolutionary Socialists" and the Islamist-controlled Social Labor Party as coalition partners. The reports of an internal coup against Akef cannot be discounted, but have yet to be supported by conclusive evidence. Aboul Fotouh's demotion, should it stand, would support the contention of those who argue that the MB's relatively recent embrace of "reform" and "democratic values" was purely tactical and not indicative of an evolved ideology within the group. End summary.

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Akef: Out or Just Down?  
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[1](#)2. (C) According to observers of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in several leading Egyptian newspapers, the MB's Guidance Bureau, its senior policy-making committee, in what might be described as an internal coup d'etat, granted in early July the powers and authority of the Supreme Guide to Deputy Supreme Guide Mohammed Habib, while not actually stripping Supreme Guide Mahdi Akef of these same powers. Soon after the first reports, several MB leaders, including both Habib and Akef themselves, denied that the Guidance Bureau had revolted against him, and accused the GOE, through proxies in the media, of conducting a disinformation campaign. Subsequently, on July 5, the independent daily Nahdat Masr published a report refuting these denials, including the text of a letter from Akef's secretary to an MB official in Giza, in which he referred matter-of-factly to Habib's new powers as acting Supreme Guide.

[1](#)3. (C) Akef has long been reputed to be unpopular with other key leaders in the Guidance Bureau, particularly with his deputies Habib and Khairat Shater, widely seen as more rigid in their thinking and whose public statements sometimes seem to contradict MB policies and positions as stated by Akef. Habib and Shater are also frequently described by MB watchers as the leaders most in touch with the sentiments and views of the MB rank-in-file, as opposed to Akef and other members of the leadership perceived as excessively pragmatic and malleable.

[1](#)4. (C) According to MB watchers, members of the Guidance Bureau have been uncomfortable with Akef's public "trial balloons," which in the recent past have included provisional pledges of loyalty to President Mubarak, subsequently retracted as GOE-MB relations took a turn for the worse this spring (refuels). According to Nahdat Masr, there is also discomfort in the Guidance Bureau with Akef's alleged efforts to promote his nephew, Ahmed Akef, in a manner some MB members reportedly likened to President Mubarak's perceived efforts to advance the political career of son Gamal. Observers inclined to lend credibility to the coup reports note both the well established tensions between Akef and Habib, and the fact that Akef's principle ally in the Guidance Bureau, Mahmoud Ezzat, remains in jail, six weeks after his arrest (ref A).

15. (C) Another development within the MB that has drawn wide comment is the reported "temporary suspension" from the Guidance Bureau of Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh. Aboul Fotouh, one of the most quoted members of the MB leadership, especially since spokesman Essam Erian's May 4 arrest (ref B), has captured significant attention for his relatively forward-leaning statements, which often appeared to signal changes of course for the MB.

16. (C) Two particular positions aired recently by Aboul Fotouh attracted attention and enhanced his reputation as a "reformer" or "liberal" within the group. First, in May, Aboul Fotouh was widely quoted criticizing fellow MB members who brandished copies of the Holy Qur'an during demonstrations. The holy text should not be used as a prop in political demonstrations, Aboul Fotouh maintained, this sent the wrong message about the demonstrator's intent and the goals of the MB. Second, Aboul Fotouh said in a May interview that the MB was prepared to accept the principal of a secular state "with religious terms of reference," an apparently fundamental change from the MB's long-standing (but recently downplayed) position that Egypt should be ruled by an Islamic Caliphate.

17. (C) Aboul Fotouh is credited by observers as one of the MB leaders principally responsible for the changes in the MB's public discourse. As discussed in reftels, the MB in the past year, and particularly in the spring of 2005 has seized on concepts such as political reform, human rights, and democratic values as points for public emphasis in place of its traditional calls for implementing Islamic Shari'a law and restoring Islam to its "proper" position as the hub of Egypt's political and social life (reftels).

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A Strange Alliance  
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18. (C) At the end of June, MB leaders began to publicize the coming formation of the National Coalition for Reform and Change. In the run-up to the July 6 press conference that would formally present the new coalition, MB sources told members of the Egyptian press that the coalition would be the most broadly based opposition movement Egypt had so far seen, and would include key opposition parties such as the Wafd, as well as the Kifaya movement, the "Karama" (dignity) movement, communists, and others.

19. (C) However, on July 3, most major Egyptian newspapers carried statements from various political groupings disclaiming any involvement in the MB's initiative. Kifaya spokesman Abdel Halim Qandil (who is also the editor of the Nasserist daily Al-Araby) affirmed that Kifaya would not cooperate with the MB's new coalition. Similarly, Hamdeen Sabahy of Karama, and a spokesman for the Wafd Party, clarified that their bodies were not involved in the coalition as did Egypt's tiny communist party, and even the fledgling movement Youth for Change, a Kifaya spin-off.

110. (C) By July 6, the MB's new coalition contained only three members upon its formation: The MB, the Socialist Labor Party (which was taken over several years ago by the hardline Islamist Magdy Hussein), and the "Revolutionary Socialists" (a tiny Trotskyite movement which first came to prominence with the late 2003 trial and eventual acquittal of its leader, Ashraf Ibrahim). Embassy contacts report that the new coalition is planning a "show of force" demonstration on July 13 in front of Abdeen Palace, the seat of the Presidential Secretariat.

111. (C) Some contacts have described the proposed demonstration as a litmus test of both the viability of the new coalition and the MB's resolve to resume demonstrations in the wake of the May arrest campaign which snared as many as 2400 MB cadres, most of whom have since been released. The GOE is unlikely to allow such a demonstration to go forward, especially in front of Abdeen Palace, and some observers are predicting that the MB will blink before deploying cadres on the 13th rather than trigger another mass arrest campaign.

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Comment  
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112. (C) The reports of an internal coup against Akef cannot be discounted but have yet to be supported by conclusive evidence. Reports of the sidelining of the "reformist" Aboul Fotouh are consistent with his recent absence from public events, including the launch of the new coalition and his silence in the media. The displacement of Aboul Fotouh from the Guidance Bureau, particularly if it holds, will vindicate

those who have argued that the MB's recent emphasis of political reform, human rights, and democracy as core objectives was tactical and not indicative of real evolution of the MB's ideology. End comment.

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